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## Framing Versatility as a Positive: Building Institutional Validity at The University of Colorado at Boulder's Writing Center

[Spring 2011/Focus](#)

by **Alaina Feltenberger and Allison Carr**, *The University of Colorado at Boulder*

One of a writing center's greatest institutional strengths is its versatility. A common misconception is that all writing centers are alike—indeed, many clients may not notice differences from one kind of organizational structure to another. Admittedly, regardless of a writing center's actual structure, it always holds to the ideal of providing support for what Muriel Harris calls "collaboration in learning about writing" (370). Yet variations in writing centers do exist, and often for complex reasons including funding, resources, prospective personnel, and the needs of the larger educational institution or community. Writing centers can be differentiated by the kind of people they employ: either what we call an expert/novice model or a peer-tutoring model, and sometimes a combination of the two. Thus, writing centers are spaces that can be tailored to the needs of the larger institution, and this versatility is one of the writing center's strengths in finding broad applications and implementation across a variety of locales.

Yet, this versatility is also paradoxically one of the writing center's greatest institutional challenges. For example, the unpredictability of this model or organizational structure means replicability is tenuous; it is sometimes difficult to simply pattern a successful writing center at one place and implement the same model in another. Because writing centers are often location-specific, it remains difficult to promote unilateral successes in methodology and training of consultants. Due to the perceived differences in writing centers, the function of a writing center and its importance in relation to the parent institution varies. In other words, because administrators may not realize the pedagogical implications behind the organization of a given writing center, hiring choices and budget decisions must continually be justified to the parent institution, and this burden usually falls on the director and consultants. A writing center's decision to employ paid professionals or institute a system of peer-tutoring has an impact on the level of professional cache that the center has within its academic community. The difficulty, then, is for a writing center to promote its versatility as a positive rather than a challenge that jeopardizes its inherent validity.

In order to demonstrate versatility as a positive facet of the writing center, we will use our own institution's center as

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**University of Colorado at Boulder**

**(CU), The Writing Center (WC)** is housed in the main campus library.

Although the location is ideal, the space itself is relatively modest, with a front desk, four designated work spaces with computers, and an adjoining Research Center staffed by a non-WC affiliated library employee. The WC has gone through several incarnations over the past few years, and its sole source of funding is through the **Program for Writing and Rhetoric (PWR)**, which is comprised of a large base of instructors with varying professional expertise who teach CU's required lower and upper-division writing courses. The WC draws primarily on the PWR's instructors for its employee base. As a result, WC consultants at CU are typically graduate students or persons with Master's or Doctorate degrees and who usually have several years of experience teaching writing. We will refer to all writing center practitioners in the expert/novice model as consultants rather than tutors; we recognize that not all people make this distinction, but we will because our university does.

As WC consultants, we consider ourselves professionals; Alaina Feltenberger is a doctoral student in the School of Education studying Literacy, has taught writing for five years, and has worked at CU's WC for three and a half years, while Allison Carr is a Master's student in the English Department, has taught writing for two years, and has worked at CU's WC for three semesters. The consultants at our WC range from graduate students and instructors to professors and professional writers. We feel it is a boon to have such consultants who are also talented teachers, for they have the benefit of prolonged exposure to theories and methodologies of composition pedagogy. In contrast, undergraduate students who work as writing tutors often need to be trained before they begin work; for our purposes, we call such practitioners peer-tutors because they often work with other undergraduate students. At CU, the WC only employs writing instructors or graduate students with similar professional qualifications, whereas tutoring programs on campus (through the athletic department or residence life, for example) hire peer-tutors.

Although many writing centers hire both types of employees, such differences between staff members often accompany a difference in pay. All consultants, whatever their experience, should be aligned with the goals of the writing center and prepared to provide what Jeff Brooks calls minimalist tutoring in an attempt to engage the client as an active author and editor of her own work. But, consultants who are writing instructors are also able to actively engage in a praxis of ideologies that shape both their professional identities and writing center work as a field. For example, we employ L. S. Vygotsky's social-constructivist concepts of individual meaning-making, as explicated in his 1978 work *Mind in Society*, in our consulting practices to ensure that we approach each consultation with the client's unique interests and concerns at the fore. We combine our intellectual positionalities in our day-to-day behavior as consultants; this enactment of praxis requires conscious action and reflection as serious practitioners of composition support.

Although many consultants share our view of writing center work as professional collaborative guidance for writers, we believe that some of the problems with the view of writing centers as merely "writing hospitals" or

correction facilities stem from the lack—or perceived lack—of pedagogical training for consultants. Peer-tutoring models are often seen as lacking expertise; and this view, whether founded or not, often translates to other writing center models as well. When the expert/novice model is employed, as it is at CU, there is a danger that the writing center may begin to be viewed as a “hospital” for those whose writing is “ill.” As Michael Pemberton says of professional consultants, “Because of our expertise, the metaphor maintains, we are better able to diagnose the specific nature of the problem evidenced in a piece of text, and we will also have the resources and knowledge available to effect a cure” (13). This metaphor fosters the perception that the consultant is akin to a medical professional with license to prescribe, rather than a collaborator in the client’s process.

If we do use a medical metaphor to think about the writing center, perhaps we should think of ourselves as physical therapists instead of doctors. Over time, consultants can help clients learn to stand on their own. We can only meet our goal of focusing on collaborative learning by thinking of ourselves as outside the business of cures, for writing centers are designed to provide “a great deal more than a place to review apostrophe rules” (Harris 371). As writing instructors, we know that it takes more to adequately address the complex “symptoms” that may affect clients’ writing. If we can emphasize that the praxis of ideologies occurring in the writing center equips our clients with skills of their own, rather than quick fixes, we increase our chances of being considered a valuable resource for the university community.

At CU, the WC is constantly under threat of budget cuts because its sole contributor, the PWR, is similarly under fire. Despite its ongoing efforts to be recognized as its own legitimate department in the **College of Arts and Sciences**, the PWR suffers from ever-increasing class sizes and ever-dwindling instructor positions. Such institutional duress translates to the WC, which has lost over one-third of its staff (from sixteen consultants down to ten) in the past year. The WC is currently looking for ways to expand its institutional profile in order to attract funding from alternative sources.

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We believe that there are a variety of ways to achieve this work of institutional profile building, both at CU and other schools, colleges, and universities. One of the most self-evident ways is to encourage consultants to participate actively in the professional composition community of which they are a part; hence, we have written this article and others, we attend and present at conferences, and we facilitate and share in local and regional writing workshops. We also engage in off-campus outreach to the larger Boulder community; Feltenberger will give presentations about peer-tutoring to a local high school with the goal of supporting its secondary-level writing center. The materials that Feltenberger utilizes in her presentation will be adapted from existing outreach guides and will also update and formalize the WC’s procedures for presenting to varied groups about collaborative consulting. Part of the ideological goal in providing this high school-level support is the notion that secondary-level writing centers will help incoming college freshmen better utilize CU’s WC because writing center work will have become a familiar option of receiving composition

support. In addition to working with local high schools, CU's WC provides additional off-campus outreach by continuing to support CU alumni, who are always welcome to visit the WC, especially to work on job application materials or graduate school applications.

As a student service, both CU's consultants and WC directors are involved in conducting workshops and presentations for different departments that use writing as a significant means of evaluation. As a consultant, Carr has participated in on-campus outreach to departments such as the English Department, whose courses require students to do a great deal of writing. Often the instructors of these courses are not familiar with the support the WC can provide for their students. Consultants can be effective ambassadors for the WC in the university community, as they can accurately describe the ideologies of the WC, as well as the nuts and bolts of a typical session. For these outreach activities, we have created quick reference guides on frequently asked writing questions, and we make ourselves available to discuss resources for integrating writing into classroom curriculum in such a way that it can eventually be used as a means of evaluation. We also promote our in-house library of style guide manuals and reference books as a campus-wide resource. Through these varied activities, the WC demonstrates the importance of fostering collaborative coalitions with both on-campus programs and neighboring institutions. This better fosters a larger community's understanding of CU's WC as a site of writing expertise and support.

Although the elevation of the WC's institutional profile is occurring gradually, we recognize the need to trumpet its versatile achievements in addition to maintaining academic relevance in university coursework. The PWR provides graduate-level classes for instructors to professionalize their teaching practices and to become familiar with pedagogical theories related to teaching composition in particular; we both have taken such courses. Currently, Carr is enrolled in a course focusing exclusively on writing center theories taught by the WC's co-director. This course situates itself first in reference to the literature that built the foundations of the WC's central ideologies and then helps instructors apply these theories to their own classrooms. Though this course is housed in the English Department, it is available to all graduate students who are interested in applying consulting models to their own teaching practices. This course encourages professional development as well as research, both of which lead to larger projects concerning writing center work. This additional research can help raise the institutional profile of the writing center, and we both hope to remain active in these types of ongoing projects.

As we have suggested, versatility as a strength of the writing center allows tremendous adaptability in meeting and exceeding the needs of a given community; as such, we recognize that we can only be experts on the institutional challenges of our own writing center at CU. Our hope is that, continual communication with other composition practitioners, we will foster a broader base of success stories from which to share strategies, research, and inspiration.

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Alaina C. Feltenberger is pursuing her PhD in Literacy, Curriculum and Instruction at **The University of Colorado at Boulder's School of Education**. She holds an MA in Literature and an MS in English Education, and she has been working at **CU's Writing Center** for four years. She is passionate about writing instruction, educational theory, social justice, and hiking with her dog and friends.

Allison Carr is a lecturer at the **University of Colorado Boulder** and a consultant at **CU's writing center**. She recently graduated from CU with her M.A. in English Literature and is looking forward to chasing the ever-elusive concept of "free time!"

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